

Exploring the Goldmine for Academic Staff Professional Development Programmes in Nigerian Public Universities

Explorando la mina de oro de los programas de desarrollo profesional del personal académico en las universidades públicas nigerianas

Bolupe Abayomi Awe; Rose Nkem Tilije; Veronica Olubunmi Adesua

ABSTRACT

The paper examined the state of the academic staffing situation in Nigerian Public Universities with various factors constraining their professional development. Funding was identified as a major factor with attendant consequences such as brain drain, academic staff deficit, structural imbalance in the distribution of academic staff and inadequate capacity-building programmes for their staff. The paper observed that most Nigerian universities lack the framework for internal staff development programmes for their academic staff. Various internal capacity building programmes that could be organized using senior academic staff within these universities were proposed. The paper identified professional development programmes in four world-class universities as models that could be adapted by Nigerian universities. The paper concluded that available potentials for academic staff development within Nigerian Public Universities remain largely untapped.

Keywords: Academic Staff; Nigerian Universities; Professional development programmes; World class universities.

RESUMEN

El artículo examina la situación del personal académico en las universidades públicas nigerianas con varios factores que limitan su desarrollo profesional. Se identificó la financiación como un factor importante, con consecuencias como la fuga de cerebros, el déficit de personal académico, el desequilibrio estructural en la distribución del personal académico y los inadecuados programas de desarrollo de capacidades para su personal. El artículo observó que la mayoría de las universidades nigerianas carecen de un marco para los programas internos de desarrollo del personal académico. Se propusieron varios programas internos de desarrollo de capacidades que podrían organizarse con el personal académico superior de estas universidades. El artículo identificó los programas de desarrollo profesional de cuatro universidades de categoría mundial como modelos que podrían ser adaptados por las universidades nigerianas. El documento concluye que los potenciales disponibles para el desarrollo del personal académico dentro de las universidades públicas nigerianas permanecen en gran medida sin explotar.

Palabras clave: Personal académico; universidades nigerianas; programas de desarrollo profesional; universidades de categoría mundial.



INFORMATION:

<http://doi.org/10.46652/rgn.v7i32.914>
ISSN 2477-9083
Vol. 7 No. 32, 2022. e210914
Quito, Ecuador


Submitted: March 20, 2022
Accepted: May 25, 2022
Published: June 3, 2022
Continuous Publication
South South Section | Peer Reviewed



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Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest is reported by the authors.

Funding

No financial assistance from parties outside this article.

Acknowledgments

N/A

Note

This paper is not a product of previous research, thesis, project, etc.

PUBLISHER



1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of universities in Nigeria in the last six decades coupled with the downturn in the nation's economy has left these universities in deplorable conditions. Perhaps in no other area has this impact been more pronounced than in the provision of academic staff. Globally, the roles of academic staff in universities are that of teaching, research and community service. Academic staff is a critical mass saddled with a primary responsibility of teaching and bringing up a young generation of students imbued with skills and knowledge for growth and development. The Tennessee Board for Regents Pilot Programme on Academic Unit (2004) states that responsibility for education quality in the higher education system starts with teaching and learning- the objective of quality improvement activity. It added that professors and students bear responsibility for teaching and learning; therefore, quality processes begin at the departmental or programme level where the academic staff is responsible for the collective work of the faculty.

Amie-Ogan and Fekarurhobo (2021) observed that the academic staff of universities are the key actors in the knowledge theatre and this leaves them with the herculean tasks of ensuring knowledge is updated, created and transmitted. The main duties and responsibilities of academic staff in higher institutions as highlighted by Jacob and Garba (2021) include:

1. To teach at undergraduate and graduate level in areas allocated by the Head of Department and review from time to time by the Head of Department.
2. To carry out research and produce publications, or other research outputs, in line with personal objectives agreed in the Staff Review Process;
3. To obtain research funding support;
4. To engage with the broader scholarly and professional committees;
5. To supervise or assist with supervision of undergraduate, taught graduate (Masters) or research graduate (M.Phil./PhD) students;
6. To contribute to the development, planning and implementation of a high-quality curriculum;
7. To assist in the development, planning and implementation of a high-quality curriculum;
8. To assist in the development of learning materials, preparing schemes of work and maintaining records to monitor students' progress, achievement and attendance.

In general, certain measures exist in Nigerian universities to ensure the high quality of academic staff. For example, the minimum qualification approved for teaching in Nigerian universities is a doctorate while those with lower qualifications have stipulated time within which to acquire their doctorate degrees. In addition, the NUC prescribed guidelines towards academic staff profiles in Nigerian universities. These guidelines provide for a pyramidal structure of academic staff where fixed percentages are recommended for the three broad categories of academic staff as follow: 20% for professor/reader, 35% for senior lecturer and 45% for Lecturer 1 and others. This pyramidal

structure aims at providing academic leadership by more experienced academics in the Nigerian University System. Also, an examination of the Minimum Academic Standard Documents (MAS) produced by the National Universities Commission (NUC) for ranking of Nigerian universities revealed that staffing took the lion share of 32%.

This article attempts a survey of staffing situation in Nigerian universities; existing academic staff professional development programmes and strategies for professional development programmes in Nigerian universities. In addition, academic staff professional development in four-world-class institutions, namely; The Australian National University, The Carnegie Mellon University, The London School of Economics and the University of Hong Kong were examined with lessons that for Nigerian Public Universities. can learn on professional development in these four-world-class universities highlighted.

2. Methodology

The study is an exploratory study that used secondary data obtained from selected Public Universities in Nigeria such as the University of Ibadan, Federal University Oye Ekiti, Ekiti State University and Adekunle Ajasin University. A review of work of other scholars was also undertaken for information that is relevant to the topic. The focus of this study is on the Nigerian Public Universities due to their peculiarities. Nigerian Public Universities are government owned institutions (State and Federal). Unlike the Private Universities, Nigerian Public Universities are prevented from charging economic fees for political expediency; thereby denying them a major source of revenue. Additionally, they are grossly underfunded with huge student enrolment figures. Thus, inadequate funding has scuttled academic staff development in these public universities. The thrust of this paper is to examine the strategies for academic staff development in Nigerian Public Universities in the face of paucity of financial resources.

3. Staffing situation in Nigerian Public Universities

Despite the pivotal role of academic staff in teaching-learning activities, they are in short supply in Nigerian universities. For instance, the percentage of academic staff to non-academic staff is about 23%, (NUC, 2006). This implies that that for every academic staff there are five non-academic staff. The Federal University System carried just about half its load of academic staff based on the National Universities Commission (NUC) Guidelines, (Okebukola, 2002). The NUC (2006) reported that only 16,856 out of the 72,704 workers in the federal university system were the academic staff. Of the 16,856 serving academic staff, 10,646 representing 60 per cent were junior academic staff while only 12% were full professors. This is at variance with the minimum academic standards that require that 25 per cent of lecturers in the universities should be full professors. In addition, the NUC calculations on teacher/student ratio based on approved Minimum Academic Standards show that the system requires about 21,912 teachers, thus leaving a deficit of 5,056 teachers in Nigerian federal universities.

Sule Kano (2007) noted that Nigeria requires about 47,000 lecturers in its university system; it has only a total of 16,000 to cater for a total student population of about 1.5 million, while the University of Harvard has 9000 students to 11,000 lecturers. He added that only adequate budgetary provision for university education in Nigeria could resolve the crisis facing the university system. The NEEDS (2013) report of the Committee on Needs Assessment of Public Universities in Nigeria indicated that there were 1.2 million students in all public universities; 85% of them undergraduates, 5% sub-degrees, 3% on post-graduate diplomas, 5% masters and 2% doctoral students. An examination of the available statistics indicates that very few students are pursuing postgraduate studies that would qualify them as academic staff in the universities. The assessment of manpower needs of Nigerian public universities conducted in 2012 by an inter-ministerial committee set up by the Federal Government revealed wide disparities between Nigerian universities and their counterparts in other parts of the world. For instance, the staff-to-student ratio in Harvard University is 1:4, Massachusetts Institute of Technology has 1:9 ratio and the University of Cambridge has 1:3 (NEEDS, 2014).

In addition to a deficit in academic staff within the Nigerian University System, structural imbalance in the distribution of academic staff has been observed. Most first-generation universities have adequate staff complement at the professorial level with a general trend of bottom-heavy staff structure. For example, in the case of Lecturer 1 and below, the observed figure for the first-generation universities was 58.4% as against the recommended figure of 45%. State universities recorded bottom-heavy academic staff structure with over 70% having their academic staff being Lecturer 1 category or lower and that in some departments the head is a Lecturer Grade II, (NUC, 2006). Fatunde (2013) indicated that the number and distribution of teaching staff in the Nigerian University System by qualification and rank indicated that the system was experiencing a crisis. This has led to a situation where some universities relied heavily on part-time and unqualified academics. For instance, to scale the accreditation hurdle, most universities in Nigeria employ situational staff to cover up for their inadequacies in staffing.

Jacob et al. (2015), reported that the shortage of qualified faculty members is arguably the greatest challenge facing Higher Education Institutions in Africa today while vacancy rates of faculty positions in Ghana and Nigeria remain high (USAID, 2014). Saint, Hartnett and Strassner (2003) reported that between 1997 and 1999, the number of academic staff declined by 12% even as enrolment expanded by 13%. Long term brain drains, combined with insufficient output from national postgraduate programmes in the face of rising enrolments, has left the Federal university system with only 48% of estimated staffing needs filled. Terry (2006) identified insufficient teaching capacity, along with inadequate teaching facilities and socioeconomically irrelevant curricula as typical problems developing countries face in their quest to achieve optimal higher education teaching.

Other factors associated with the shortage of academic staff include the stoppage of graduate assistantship scheme; the inability to replace academic staff that exited the system due to retirement or death as well as the poor remuneration that makes teaching in the universities

unattractive. Through the graduate assistantship scheme during the glorious era of university education in Nigeria, attempts were made to send best graduates for doctorate programmes abroad from where universities got a regular supply of academic staff.

However, to address the issue of deficit in the strength of academic staff, some remedial measures are taken by universities. Such measures include employment of retired lecturers either as adjunct lecturers or on contract; preference for employment of lecturers in the lower cadre to reduce wage bill as well as the lateral conversion of non-teaching staff to academic staff. This latter strategy appears to be attractive as it does not increase the wage bill of the universities. It is important to note that these approaches to solving the problems of shortage of academic staff in Nigerian universities have serious implications on the quality of university education. Jacob et al. (2015), observed that quality has emerged as one of the most common topics of debate and focus in virtually all higher education circles in the 21st Century. It is a topic of paramount importance to senior higher education administrators, faculty members and students in most areas of decision making, course delivery and research.

The chronic shortage of academic staff has led to a situation where inexperienced academic staff occupy sensitive positions in the university. In addition to this, newly employed academic staff commence academic functions without any form of orientation. Both the inexperienced academic staff and newly employed ones need guidance from senior academic colleagues for survival in an academic environment. This can only be realized where strong academic leadership exists.

4. Strategies for academic staff professional development in Nigerian Universities

Professional development refers to all activities geared towards the acquisition of new knowledge and skills for effective job delivery. Professional development can also be described as continuing education and career training after a person has entered the workforce in order to help them develop new skills, stay up to date on current trends and advance in his career. In addition, professional development can refer to many different types of relevant educational or training opportunities relevant to a professional work

The essence of professional development is to give professionals the opportunity to learn and apply new knowledge and skills that can help them in their job and further their career. In order for a person to build up necessary skills and knowledge base in his in his field, professional development is crucial. Some of the benefits of professional development include the following:

- Expansion of knowledge base.
- Building confidence and hireability.
- Opportunities for networking
- Keeping a professional current on trends in his field; and
- Opening of doors for future career change.

Individuals need active participation in professional development in order to maintain professional competence, to enhance career progression, to keep abreast of new technology and practices or to comply with professional regulatory requirements. Boyel (2004) opines that through staff development activities staff acquire knowledge about educational issues and problems, develop and utilize new or improved skills or work ethics and methods, clarify work related attitudes and values, derive greater satisfaction from work with students, and develop greater stimulation and supportive relationship with their colleagues. and there is the need for attendance of workshops, professional conferences as well as intimate relationship with more experienced professional colleagues in the same field.

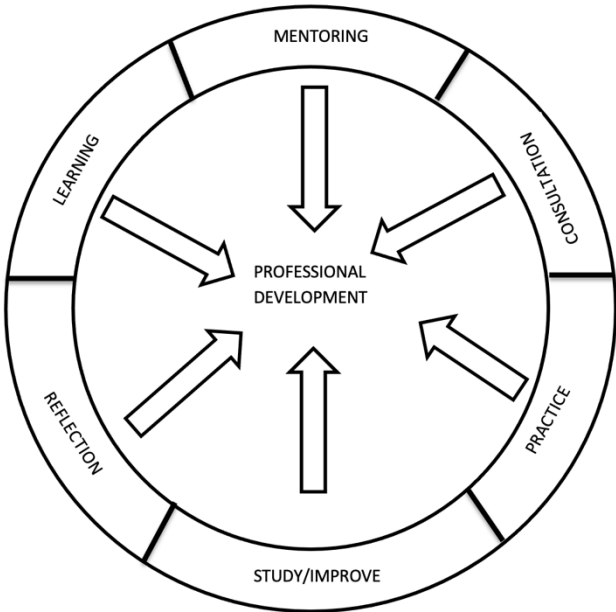
Basil et al. (2013), admitted that capacity building programmes have been adjudged to be critical factors in Nigerian universities, culminating in their positions as major determinants of lecturers' professional advancement. Apart from gaining pedagogical and content knowledge, lecturers' participation in the programme enhances capacity building effectiveness in universities. Additionally, it transforms role performance abilities and skills of lecturers in such a way and manner that they meet and fit adequately in the challenges of their job. Nazreen, and Mirza (2012),

Kahn and Tajudeen (2012) revealed that faculty training and development practices in form of coaching, seminars and workshops were key in improving teachers skills and attitudes in old universities compared to new universities. World Bank (2019) recognises the importance of professional development opportunities for both in and out of work. However, experience in Nigerian universities reveals unstructured staff development programmes in contrast to the situation up till the late 70s. This is one of the major reasons universities managements have to look inward and utilize intellectuals within to facilitate staff development. Potentials of experienced academic staff in Nigerian universities have to be harnessed for staff development. This is because of the moribund economy that has made overseas staff development training unrealistic. It behoves Nigerian universities to use more experienced academic staff to groom their junior colleagues. These highly resourceful academics within Nigerian universities are the unexplored goldmines that must be tapped for professional development staff programmes for academic staff.

Experience has revealed that newly appointed academic staff in Nigerian universities more often than not are not formally inducted into the system; a development that leads to a lack of academic culture. Johnson (2011) observed that the teaching role is particularly salient to those just beginning their academic careers and who are teaching (perhaps for the first time) in a new environment. The issue for much academic staff is how to juggle the demands of teaching with other roles. The acquisition of a doctorate is inadequate to cope with the demand of teaching and research. This demand can be sometimes overwhelming to academic staff without proper guidance from more experienced colleagues. Therefore, a well-structured and centralized

professional development programme for academic staff can be institutionalized using more experienced faculty staff. Figure 1 demonstrates various strategies that can be deployed for professional development of academic staff in Nigerian universities.

Figure 1: Professional Development Teacher Education School Skill.



Source: Imgbin.com (2018).

The need for greater emphasis on in-house professional development stems from paucity of fund. For instance, the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) is saddled with the administration and disbursement of fund to public tertiary educational institutions in Nigeria particularly for the provision and maintenance of the following:

- Essential physical infrastructure for teaching and learning;
- Instructional materials and development;
- Research and publication;
- Academic staff training and development; and
- Any other need which in the opinion of the Board of Trustees is critical and essential for the improvement of quality and maintenance of standard in higher educational institutions.

As laudable as the objectives of TETFund are, the agency is bedeviled with a lot of constraints. For instance, Akomolafe and Bello (2019) identified challenges inherent in accessing this fund as including: delay in approval of fund, approval of insufficient fund; stringent conditions attached to access to the fund and administrative bottlenecks among others.

A study conducted by Basil et al. (2013), on university lecturers' participation in capacity building programmes in South-South Nigeria indicated that university lecturers participate mostly in conferences with low participation in other capacity building programmes such as workshops, seminars, conferences and ICT training. The issue is how many academic staff benefitted from these types of capacity building programmes. The reality is that attendance at such programmes is to beef up their curriculum vitae and not to improve their knowledge and skills in their primary assignments of teaching, research and community service.

For example, during Annual Performance Appraisal, academic staff are supposed to indicate number of workshops, seminars, conferences, and other capacity building programmes attended during the period. In order to substantially meet this requirement, most lecturers attach their certificates of attendance at conferences while very few attend capacity building programmes that are critical to their primary assignments. It is instructive to note that even attendance at international conferences by academic staff in Nigerian Public Universities is very rare due to lack of sponsorship. Thus, attendance at conferences by most academic staff in Nigerian Public Universities is geared to fulfillment of all righteousness. Therefore, in order to make up for inadequate academic staff professional development in Nigerian Public Universities, the initiative for academic staff development programmes must be domiciled within individual universities. This strategy is less financially demanding as resources for in-house training can be sources from within unlike overseas training. Attempt will be made to examine some of the approaches of few world class universities to capacity building of academic staff.

5. Professional Development in World Class Universities

Jacob et al. (2015), observed that given the academic staffing crisis confronting Higher Education Institutions in Africa, professional development must be accorded high priority. Since there is no end in sight to the poor staffing situation in Nigerian universities, emphasis must be on professional development programmes for the academic staff. It, therefore, becomes imperative for universities to look inward and leverage on the intellectual capacity of the existing academic staff within the system to groom less experienced and newly employed academic staff.

In all of Africa, it is perhaps most universities in South Africa and Egypt that have featured relatively well in the world ranking tables. The performance of the Nigerian universities remains far below expectations. This situation is so unfortunate and worrisome that it calls for attention and action on the part of the government, the Nigerian intelligentsia and indeed the Nigerian people. According to Jacob et al. (2015), compared with other regions, Africa and Latin America have no representative among the top 100 universities on the three global rankings systems. However, the 2022 Webometrics Ranking of Universities indicated that Universidade de Sao Paulo (Brazil largest public university) ranks 72, while the Premier University in Nigeria, ranks 1231 (<https://www.webometrics.info/en/WORLD>). A study conducted by Jacob et al. (2015), on faculty development centres at eight-world-class universities revealed structural characteristics as well as best practices in terms of programme development and resource management.

A summary of how faculty development centres in four of these world-class universities strengthen the quality of the teaching and research in their respective institutions are as follow:

- The Australian National University has a Centre of Higher Education, Learning and Teaching as a central organisation overseeing the professional development of staff in the University.
- The Carnegie Mellon University has Eberly Centre for Teaching Excellence and Educational Innovation which provides specific supporting activities and high-value services to improve faculty's teaching which includes one-on-one teaching consultations, workshops and seminars for faculty and graduate students. In addition, blackboard help and support; guidance in solving teaching problems; incoming faculty orientation and skills development; and teaching observation, focus groups and course evaluation are provided.
- In the London School of Economics, the Teaching and Learning Centre serves as the professional development centre. The overall structure of this Centre is considered peculiar due to its ability to combine professional development and student support services.
- The University of Hong Kong has a Centre for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning which functions as a service-oriented and research-led centre dedicated to facilitating university-wide teaching and learning activities. This Centre offers professional learning opportunities to faculty members through workshops and seminars, covering multiple teaching and learning topics to help improve teaching.

One single thread running through approaches to staff development in these four-world-class institutions is the presence of Centres for coordinated staff development programmes. This is at variance with what obtains in most Nigerian universities where staff development is not properly coordinated and left for individual initiative. Faculty members who are seeking academic and professional enrichment have to sponsor themselves or combine full-time studies with their academic work in their respective universities.

5. Conclusion

It appears obvious that underfunding of education in Nigeria will continue to be a contentious issue particularly in the Nigerian University System. This is evident in persistent strike actions by Academic Staff Union of Universities in Nigeria; a situation that poses a serious threat to academic staff development in Nigeria. Therefore, the quest for improvement in the Webometrics Ranking of Nigerian universities will continue to be a mirage. Emphasis must of necessity be placed on professional development programmes of academic staff for Nigerian universities to be relevant in knowledge economy. The prevailing lackadaisical attitude towards academic staff professional development programmes in the Nigerian University System endangers the quality of its academic programmes. Thus, based on the discussion in this article, the following recommendations are made.

- i.) Periodic screening of academic staff to ascertain their level of professional competency.
- ii.) Recommendation of academic staff for appropriate professional development programmes.
- iii.) Institutionalization of mentoring as strategy for professional development among academic staff.
- iv.) Establishment of Quality Assurance and Professional Development Centre to handle the induction of newly employed academics and training and retraining of existing ones.
- v.) Inter- Faculty collaboration on professional development programmes for academic staff must be encouraged.
- vi.) Resuscitation of graduate assistantship schemes for students that pass out of universities with first class grade.

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